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ABSTRACT

The informal vocational learning experiences of 13 young Australians preparing for the transition from school to work were examined. At the time of their interview, all 13 youths were students at a hybrid educational site in the Sydney metropolitan area that allows students to combine general education with vocational qualifications and experience in the workplace. The youths responded to an advertisement for research volunteers who had a clear vocational goal and believed they were engaging in activities designed to increase their opportunities for gaining employment in their desired area. Although the respondents' stories reflected a wide range of patterns of activities, they also contained several similarities. All students interviewed had changed their place of education at the end of year 10, and all chose to transfer to an educational institution offering a hybrid approach to postcompulsory education and training. All were aware of the importance and desirability of preparing for a range of career options. Despite being vocationally goal-oriented, many participants were unable or unwilling to articulate anything but a vague concept of "pathway." All participants had workplace experience in their area of vocational interest, and all considered exposure to work in their chosen industry a valuable experience. (Contains 24 references.) (MN)

Informal vocational learning experiences of young people: some research findings

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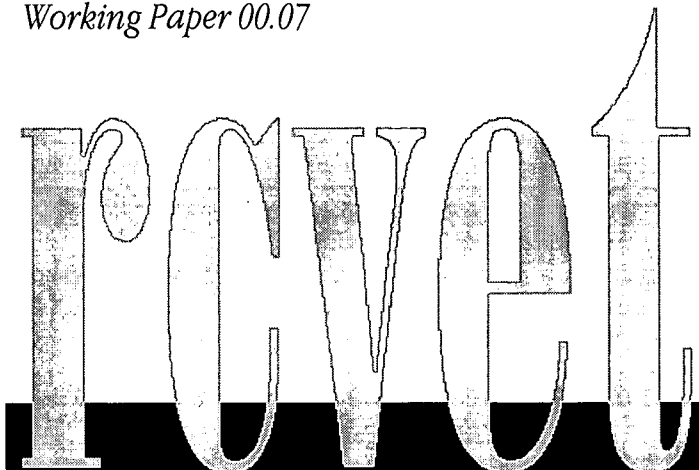
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INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on research being conducted as part of the RCVET's national key centre program supported by the Australian National Training Authority (RP101). It focuses on the issue of school-to-work transition and seeks to add to the current discussion by examining the activities of a group of young people who see themselves as successfully preparing for entry into the labour market. As such, it is concerned with telling stories about the types of actions they perceive to be useful and the types of learning they see themselves engaging in during this time of transition in their lives.

An earlier paper discussed the theoretical rationale for a different approach to the vocational learning of young people and the expectations of youth policy (RCVET Working Paper 00-01, Jayne Bye, Making pathways: Young people and their informal vocational learning).

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

There has been a rigorous examination of the notion of transition and pathways in the academic literature, and analysis of evidence that suggests that youth transition policy interventions are out of step with the current needs of young people (Sweet, 1998). Yet there has been little research into what young people actually do for themselves to make themselves ready for entry into the full-time labour market and how these actions might be viewed in relation to the changing conditions in the labour market. There is a paucity of data in Australia on the learning that takes place when young people initially engage with the world of work (Smith, 2000). This research aims to contribute to the discussion by looking at how young people perceive their pathways to vocational goals and reports on their perceptions, assumptions, attitudes, motivations and expectations. Specifically, the project looks at the activities of a group of young people who have identified themselves as highly vocationally motivated and as having made significant progress in attaining their goals. Furthermore, narrative data collected from young people may be able to shed light on the question of the extent they are aware of 'pathways' (in the sense of pre-existing, mapped trajectories to their employment goals) or whether they see themselves as individually responsible for charting their own courses through this evidently complicated transition process. As Chisholm (1999) suggests –

Perhaps it would now be sensible – and possibly even more cost-effective – to look at what young people actually do; discover thereby what kinds of information, advice, and support they would find most useful; and then design and provide targeted services on that basis. This is, after all, one way of ensuring that institutions keep up with individuals (p.317).

PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

The 13 participants selected for this study were all, at the time of interview, students at what is probably best described as a hybrid educational site in the Sydney metropolitan area. At this site students are able to undertake a post-compulsory program of study which allows them to combine general education with vocational qualifications and experience in the workplace. Depending on the program selected, students can complete the NSW Higher School Certificate (with or without a University Admissions Index), a TAFE certificate chosen from a range of vocational areas and up to approximately 200 hours of industry placement.

This sample is therefore selective on a number of levels. Firstly, by selecting participants from the cohort of students at this site, we chose to focus on a group of young people who had already made some vocational choices by attending this college. They had therefore also been exposed to VET through TAFE specifically while also choosing to complete post-compulsory general education. Secondly, they were also selected because they identified themselves as individuals who felt they were engaging in “extra” activities designed to position them more effectively for a job in a specific area of interest. For example, many of the participants were already working part-time in the industry that they were focused on in terms of a future career, getting extra qualifications/experiences that they thought employers would value and initiating their own networking within the industry.

For an individual profile of each of the participants, see Appendix 1.

APPROACH

A number of key assumptions have guided the research process and these assumptions can be seen to have impacted on the collection of data and its subsequent treatment in this paper. The framework within which this research operates proposes that the young people involved are negotiating a complex process of construction, namely the construction of an *adult self* within which identities in relation to school and work are a significant but not exclusive feature. The questions they have been asked focus on their interactions with general and vocational education institutions, current and future employers, and the plans they are making for their future careers. It is worth noting however, that the participants also had many things to say about their relationships, families, culture and non-work related hopes and dreams and these features of their lives clearly have important constitutive impacts on their sense of themselves as young adults. That these features of their lives also have an impact on the nature of decisions made concerning education and vocational goals is undoubted despite being rarely focused upon in this paper.

The data categories which form the Findings section of this paper are therefore to some extent reductionist and do not represent the rich picture which many of the young participants were able to convey of their lives and the forces they perceived to be shaping their decisions. It is not the intention of this research to reduce the lives and stories of these young people into a series of headings/categories. In a recent publication on youth transitions, Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) discuss the ‘raft of “silences”’ (p.59) evident in much of the research completed on youth transitions and young people’s decision

making. They critique the propensity of such research to produce a “very utilitarian version of what it is to be a young person in contemporary society (Rees et al., 1997 in Ball, 2000, p.59)” due to the overwhelming “concern with upskilling, reskilling and labour-market needs – policies of futurity, the work ethic and human capital theory” (p.59). In some ways, this paper adds to this trend and does not go very far at all in challenging the “silences,” however it does attempt to change the focus of much of the current reporting in Australia by looking at how young people see themselves and what they perceive to be productive activities in directing their own transitions and therefore defining successful transitions in terms of their own expectations and goals.

METHOD

The participants in this study were volunteers who responded to a request for research participants at their place of study. Specifically, the advertisements which were posted in public areas of the site of study asked for volunteers who had a clear vocational goal and who felt that they were engaging in activities which were designed to increase their opportunities for gaining employment in their desired area. Potential participants were then asked to fill in a short survey which simply required them to outline their area of vocational interest and to list the range of relevant activities they were engaged. Participants were selected on the nature of these activities, specifically those activities which had provided experience of the workplace.

Participants were paid \$20 to participate in a one hour interview during which time they were asked to recount their experiences in relation to decision-making, information gathering and workplace learning.

This feature of the selection process has had clear implications for the types of stories these young people told and hence the basis of the data collected. The fact that the participants identified themselves as young people “on the road” to successful vocational outcomes meant that the stories they told were overwhelmingly optimistic in tone and content. It appeared that the majority of participants were happy because they felt that they were participating in authentic activities which were helping them progress in their desired directions. The fact that they were happy in their educational and workplace surroundings appears to have made them more content as students and therefore more likely to complete the general and vocational qualifications they had undertaken. The conventional wisdom on youth transitions appears to support the notion that the longer young people stay in education and training and the higher their qualifications, the greater the likelihood of a “successful” transition to employment. So in terms of the outcomes of this project, whether or not the aspirations described by the young people in this study are achieved in the form that they were described is to some extent, not the point. Indeed, a longitudinal design would be more appropriate if such projections were part of the aims of this project. Therefore their proposed career trajectories as described in this paper are not necessarily meant to provide a blueprint for what young people *should* be doing if they wish to enter the careers that these participants aspire to, although a number of participants are clearly laying some solid career foundations worthy of emulation. If this research has anything to say to policy about school-to-work transitions, it is to highlight the sorts of educational opportunities and encounters that a group of young people feel are valuable to them and

which serve to keep them optimistic and motivated about futures where “change is the only certainty” (Ball et al, 2000, p.2) and most importantly, keep them in education and training.

FINDINGS

Transition Stories

In each interview, participants were asked to relate the story of how they had arrived at the point in their lives where they felt that they had made some significant decisions about their vocational interests and had taken action to increase the likelihood of achieving specific vocational goals.

The individual nature of each of these stories reflect the range of patterns of activities reported by McKenzie (2000) and the comments made by participants suggest that they do perceive their pathways as “highly individualised” (2000, p.8). However, there were some interesting similarities in the experiences reported in the narratives and these emerging themes will be discussed below.

Pessimism at the end of year 10

As outlined above in the participant profile, each of the students interviewed had changed their place of education at the end of year 10. They had all made an active decision to change a major focus of their adolescent lives by transferring to an educational institution which offered a hybrid approach to post compulsory education and training. And while all except one participant reported feeling very happy in their current situation, each described the situation they faced in and at the end of year 10 as distressing. There were a number of key issues each of them reported feeling disturbed about during this time, often in quite graphic terms. The first significant issue of concern appeared to be the prospect and process of making decisions about subjects for the HSC. In the school environments described, this process appeared to be infused with a sense that the decisions being taken about subjects should reflect career path decisions which were expected to be made at or before this time. Some of the responses reflected a degree of discomfort on the part of participants who were asked to engage with this process. The distress experienced by participants fell into two main categories. The first concerned a complete lack of ideas about career path or even career interest at this stage –

At that point, everything was closed, everything was in a rush. People were already deciding what they wanted to do and I was standing there alone, stranded without any idea whatsoever. I talked to my friends sometimes.”

I didn't know where I was.

There was a time I said to myself it just doesn't matter any more. I'll decide maybe when I'm older. But unfortunately, everyone had to for some reason. I mean the whole school, maybe it seemed to me at the time, the whole school were already settling into their future decisions.

I was left out.
(Eric)

The second category of pessimistic responses was more concerned with the prospect of continuing into the post-compulsory years doing subjects/a course that held no perceived relevance or interest. Perceived lack of choice and a sense of dreaded inevitability and constraint pervade comments in this category -

I was gonna have to do computer courses and all that sort of stuff,...and I didn't want to do that. I wasn't interested. (Belinda)

At the end of year 10, everyone has to choose what you're going to do for 11 and 12. No matter what. You have to choose the subjects you're going to do. And at that point...I didn't have any idea what I wanted to do and I thought there's no point in me choosing something that I don't want to do and I hated school. (Kim)

Around the time they were making us, and I use the term *making* us, choose classes for year 11 and 12, and that really scared me because even though I was told its just for the HSC, its not set in concrete....because the school I was going to didn't have many choices, I didn't see that I had a lot of choices...it was pretty scary. (Ian)

These students seemed to have a strong sense of decisions being forced upon them prematurely and fearing the consequences of poor decisions. Many reported wanting to leave at this stage despite the fact that less than 18 months later, each of them was happily engaged in a new educational environment where they had nominated a vocational focus as well as having entered into the HSC. The apparent turnaround in their attitudes to education and training appeared to be the result of the option of studying in an alternative environment where a wider range of choices were available in terms of vocational and general education subjects as well as a range of outcomes in terms of qualifications and experience. The sense of agency in having made a decision to stay in education appears to have had significant benefits for this group.

A number of questions and issues arise from the comments of this small group of positive learners. At the forefront of these issues must be that of early school leaving. Although it is impossible to ascertain to what extent the participants in this site were genuinely at risk of early leaving, in their stories of transition into post-compulsory education and training many of them focused on this as a possibility that had been countenanced and in the case of Kim, this option had been acted upon (if only for a year). What would have happened in similar instances where the options provided by the hybrid site were not available? In his recent large scale study of the preferences and choices of secondary school students in years 10-12, James (2000) suggests that "[t]he existence of attractive VET options while at school may be one way of sustaining school retention rates and stemming the rising rate of early leaving" (p.38). In the cases of most of the participants in the study, this feature of the learning environment could certainly be seen as having a very positive impact on students' willingness to stay in education.

Planning for a range of options and outcomes

Another theme which emerges from the narratives of the participants is an awareness of the importance and desirability of preparing for a range of career options. For example, some were preparing for what might be called consecutive career options, that is, planning to start out in one area in the short to medium term and moving into another career in the longer term. Others could be seen as planning for what might be termed "safety net"

options which consisted of jobs which could be entered into while working to establish the priority option. The implications of this type of planning will be further explored in the section below dealing with expectations of transition.

The foundation of this range of future options was seen by quite a number of participants as being laid in the range of outcomes they were working to meet during their post-compulsory years –

Its perfect. I kill two birds with one stone. I finish my HSC and I learn more and more and more everyday about what I want to do. (Lloyd)

I could come here and I could do my HSC, *and* I could get a UAI, *and* I could get a TAFE certificate... So if you're going to be at school... I'm gonna want to get the most out of it as I can... not just go to some crap school. (Sandra)

In important ways, it would seem that having a vocational goal also had an impact on how general education qualifications, specifically the HSC were viewed and tolerated. Students who were unhappy throughout year 10 and had considered leaving school now reported making decisions to stay in the HSC even in the face of job offers in their desired vocational area. In fact, several participants had already been offered employment in their chosen vocational area but had decided against taking it up at this point. An exchange during the interview with Eric illustrates the way he was now thinking about his prospects and the role qualifications might play –

... the boss is very happy with my progress. So he's actually said, um, in a few months, if I can make a nice data base for him, which I'm currently working on, um, he'll give me a full-time job.

[Interviewer: What would this mean for studies at this college? Will you leave?]

No way – I still want to be the best I can when it comes to qualifications, so I'll stay here but I'll try to juggle both of them. (Eric)

One of the key factors here seems to be, once again, the sense of choice in decision-making where options which are perceived as useful could be taken. The alternative to this situation, that is, being forced into curriculum no longer deemed purposeful was described in the following ways -

And I guess I wasn't going very well because of my interest in all the subjects I was doing. I wouldn't give anything for geography. I wouldn't care about it. But, um, but as soon as I knew there are more subjects here [at the college], the ones that I actually like, the ones I can pick out, the ones I have an interest in and progress in, I said, well, you know, stuff religion and all that, I'm coming over here. (Eric)

Every class I do now is a class I enjoy. (Ian)

These findings once again, add to the picture created by the work of James (2000) who found that despite the fact that "[o]n the whole, the students surveyed are reasonably positive about school" (p.22), they did perceive that some types of learning were of more value than others.

For example, looking at their responses to the statement 'You learn more on

the job than you do in a classroom or from books' – to which there is a soberingly high level of agreement by students overall...One student interviewed for the study summed up this sentiment by saying 'people ...prefer to be out and experiencing life rather than learning it through books.' (p.22).

While opinions similar to this were noted in the current study, the decisions that participants made to stay in general education in the face of job offers seem to suggest that when young people can have "both types" of learning, that is, learning from the workplace *and* the general education classroom, they appeared more able to see the relevance of general education qualifications such as the HSC. Importantly, they did not see vocational and general education as an either/or prospect and could certainly discuss the relative merits of both during interviews.

Perceptions of Pathway

Despite being vocationally goal oriented, many participants were unable or unwilling to articulate anything but a vague concept of "pathway." Furthermore, despite the fact that the participants were self-identified by their clear grasp of vocational goals, these were often goals where the participants lacked a clear idea about how or by what pathway they would be achieved. In one striking instance, the notion of a clear pathway was dismissed as a "dull" prospect. When asked if he could see a path to his goals, Henry responded that if he had any notion of a pathway it was at best –

...damned blurred! I really don't think there is any path that can be put across as any archetypal way of getting to a job or archetypal way of securing a position. And if there is, it would be dull! (Henry)

What appears to replace an acceptance of the notion of pathway is a pervasive self-concept of autonomy, possibility and flexibility. The comments reported below reveal these participant characteristics in their reported expectations of the transition process, their concerns with flexibility and their overwhelming sense of optimism about the probability of success in reaching their goals (despite vague notions about *how* they would get there). A sense of the "order and structure" (McKenzie, 2000 p.1) implied by the pathways model of policy and practice seemed distinctly absent from the participants' comments. The comments reflect a strong acceptance of the fact that transition will be complex and most likely fractured. In some cases, it was clear that the young people were actively involved in contingency planning around these expectations. This feature of the data resonates strongly with McKenzie's point concerning the apparent increasing individualisation in the transition processes as well as Furlong and Cartmel's analysis which states that -

because there are a much greater range of pathways to choose from, young people may develop the impression that their own route is unique and that the risks they face are to be overcome as individuals rather than as members of a collectivity (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997 p.7).

That the participants had an overwhelming sense that they were responsible for their own destinies and were therefore in control of and responsible for their success (or failure) in achieving their vocational goals comes through clearly in their comments outlined below.

Much of the youth-in-transition literature highlights the increasing trend for young people's transitions being fractured, complex and risky (Chisholm, 1999; Curtain, 1999; Dwyer, 1997; McKenzie, 2000). The future for many young people it would seem will be one of casualised, low paying, short term employment. In the current literature, young people are portrayed as the victims of these features of the labour market. However, in an interesting reversal, a number of participants described just these types of risk-laden transitions, not in terms of fears for the future but as manageable and occasionally desirable prospects.

I know how hard it is to get into the industry and I know people that are in the industry that might work for 5 months of the year and then not get any more jobs for 3 months and then all of a sudden get lots of work again. So I know that you've gotta have, I'm not always gonna have work. I might have to go and get a job in a bar or as a secretary for 3 months or something like that. And I don't mind that because I know work's gonna come back to me. The more I get my name out there, the more work that'll come to me. I don't mind if it's not full-time. (Kim)

For Kim, her sense of possibilities and prospects had more to do with contingency plans dependent upon the likelihood that breaking into the video production industry may be a process which occurs gradually -

When I leave school, that's what I'm gonna do – just go out and find work wherever. I don't care if I have to work in a bar or something like that to keep myself living, but just to go out and do work like that... The more people I know the more likely I'm gonna get work. (Kim)

Other participants whose goal was to work in an aspect of the entertainment industry, described their expectations of the transition process often in terms of luck and capitalising on serendipitous opportunities -

I don't make conscious decisions... I sort of go – if this happens, if that happens... (Susan)

I don't think there is any clear path.... It's mostly luck. (Susan)

Despite this seeming appreciation of the difficult nature of the industry, many of the comments from the entertainment industry participants were confident despite the uncertainties. For example, a strong sense of seemingly endless possibilities are apparent in Sandra's comments which were all presented as desirable alternatives or prospects -

I don't see myself going down a path as such, like going... just see what happens, see what's offered, see which way... what I think of to go up to next. Maybe I'll jump over to another company. Then maybe get a crap job, save money, travel and do the same thing in a different country then come back here, save up again and start my own company. (Sandra)

For other participants who had chosen more mainstream/traditional vocational areas, the sense of possibilities in the transition process emerged as more information was gained through the education and training environment as well as exposure to industry.

It [Eric's pathway] seemed pretty clear at first and when I started... after a few months at this school, I kind of got the idea that, well you know, programming. I could go to university after this to get where I want to go. I could go to TAFE and do another certificate, maybe a diploma there, um, then these new options came up all of a sudden for this one path I already chose. So

the path that I chose led me to more paths, OK and these paths, I'm still facing at the moment.
(Eric)

Concern with flexibility/maintaining choices/range of options

Another set of perceptions about the creation of pathways seemed to be an assumption that a degree of flexibility could or should be built into the transition process. For example, the prospect of combining work in the desired vocational area with further study was often part of the planning process. For some, like Susan who were less certain about their ability to win enough work to keep them fully maintained, the prospect of being able to keep a range of options open seemed important as a "safety net." The possibility of training as a boom operator on film and television productions so that she could still work in between acting jobs was a possibility she had looked into. Also, the possibility of doing a university degree had been explored since she had learned that many "older actresses" often did this when they could no longer gain regular work.

For others like Eric, building in flexible options was a product of having laid desirable and successful foundations in different but ultimately harmonious directions -

I do want to go to university. I do want to get the highest degree I can but then again, I've got a good job there waiting for me. So how should I do it? What should I do?....Well maybe there's a way I can take both. Maybe I can go to university part-time and work there full-time. (Eric)

For Lloyd who appeared to be planning for a seemingly endless array of varied pathways, some options were actively being pursued *because* they allowed for flexibility. In fact, both Lloyd and Ian were attracted to firefighting as a career because of the shift arrangements. Firefighters, as they both reported, are rostered 4 days on and 4 days off -

...leaving half the week for studying...that's where the marketing [degree] came in. (Lloyd)

I'm not locked in. (Ian)

Optimism/Pessimism about prospects

All 13 of the participants were overwhelmingly optimistic about their chances of success. Ball (2000) states that this belief in the full range of possibilities being open to them is a consistent finding in recent school-to-work transition research.

Young people constantly reiterate that they *do* have choices, that luck, hard work and sheer determination are the bases of 'success'The young people see themselves as individuals in a meritocratic setting, not as classed or gendered members of an unequal society (Ball, 2000, p.4).

For some participants in this study, their confidence was based on their reading of labour market prospects for young people -

There's a position always available (Henry)

"I don't believe that people can't get jobs" (Aaron)

There's definitely jobs out there. (Robert)

Interestingly, the participants who had perhaps chosen the vocational area with the most precarious career path – the entertainment industry – were the most vociferous in their optimism about their chances of winning desirable work. Once again, a self-concept based on a sense of confidence and self-belief was prevalent.

You need that confidence, otherwise you're not going to get anywhere....In one way or another, I will make it somewhere in the entertainment industry. I know that. (Aaron)

Such individualistic discourses were one of the most striking attitudinal themes in this study.

Impact of direct industry exposure

All participants had workplace experience in their area of vocational interest. For a number of them, this exposure had been initiated through a structured work placement through their program of study. However, a number of them had self-initiated industry experience. Some had already completed the total number of hours of industry training required by their chosen vocational program and were continuing on with their placement on a voluntary basis. For all participants, exposure to work in the industry they planned to work within was a highly valued experience.

Use of opportunities

One of the key features of the responses to questions about industry experience was the willingness of participants to make the greatest use of opportunities provided. For example, Eric was one of the participants who had been offered a job at his industry placement and was clearly laying some very substantial foundations there. He reported that the “formal” aspect of his industry training was almost complete (in terms of the hours required) but was planning to continue with the company on an informal basis -

I'm going there [full-time] throughout the holidays... 'Cause I really want a job there. It's a good place.

Similarly, Belinda expanded her experience by choosing a second industry placement-

I didn't need the hours, I just wanted to go there. (Belinda)

It was evident from their comments that participants were employing strategies based on the traditional adages of creating employment opportunities such as “making contacts”, “meeting people” and attempting to “stand out from the crowd” -

I said to myself, I may as well take it to my advantage to use this course in order to get some contacts in some industries. (Eric)

Through industry training I've been able to hand my resume and [get] a lot of personal experience with most of the career departments in AGL, Zenith Media, Optus – a lot of different places. (Henry)

Being given the opportunity to be in such a great environment, I wanted to pay them back. I wanted to really work for them, so I did a lot of work...I got to, well number one, everyone

says make contacts and I not only got to speak to people in AGL but I got introduced to a lot of people and companies that were partnering with AGL in sponsoring and I learned about the dealings between these companies. (Henry)

Furthermore, a number of participants saw themselves as developing the skills of *creating* opportunities as distinct from waiting for opportunities to present themselves. For example, Aaron was very proud of the way he saw himself finding and making the most of any opportunity he saw in the very competitive entertainment industry. At age 14, he approached a sound technician from a P.A. hire company and gave his name and number -

I just said, um...are you looking for anyone to do odd jobs. I'm only 14, I don't know much about it but I'm willing to do absolutely anything."

The outcome of this strategy - he received an offer of part-time paid work approximately 1 month later - was seen by Aaron as proof of the wisdom of his developing philosophy -

And that's what I mean about taking things as they come but when they do come, look at what you can make out of it.

I'm always up for connections and hassling people for work.

Similarly, Sandra saw herself as actively developing her understanding of the entertainment industry philosophy of "it's not what you know, but who..."

I just kind of stuck my foot in and said I want to do this and I approached lots of people, introduced myself to everyone I knew in the most formal way possible....[Now]...I know, like, *everyone*, or people that know everyone. (Sandra)

Thus at age 17, both of these young people have a well-developed sense of their own ability to not only respond to opportunities but also to create them for themselves – a skill which both participants saw as standing them in good stead in the competitive fields they had chosen.

How learning occurs in this environment

One theme explored during the interview discussion about experiences working in industry was how the young people thought learning took place in this environment. While all participants agreed that they were learning "a lot" through their work experience and that this learning was valuable, few could elaborate clearly *how* they perceived the learning to be taking place.

Of all the participants, Susan had the most industry exposure – she had been acting and making films since early childhood. Consequently, she had some interesting reflections on the nature of the learning she had done in the work environment of a film set.

For someone my age, I've done a lot of film work...No one ever teaches you things, no one ever goes 'here's a mark, practice stepping onto it'....I guess you just learn it by being in the environment so many times.

The pressure's really on. You've got to pick up things really fast and there's no time for messing around.

In fact, at the time of interview, Susan was waiting to find out if she had been successful in auditions she had just completed for a prestigious drama school and had in the process, given quite a degree of consideration to the differences she perceived between the on-the-job learning she had done and training in a drama school. She reported that she received varying messages from people in the industry about the value of formal, off-the-job training. For example, some industry contacts had emphasised the importance of training while others had said to her -

Don't you dare go to [drama school]. It's a waste of bloody time...The only training you need to get is on the job. That's the only training you're gonna get that's worth anything. (Susan)

Because these issues were central to Susan's life at the time of the interview, she clearly had given much thought to the perceived differences in on-the-job training and more formalised arrangements in a dedicated training environment -

You can get training by simply doing things enough...but it's a very different training...On-the-job training is just for the job - just being able to do things quickly and efficiently. Whereas training in a school is quite theoretical and you really learn how to sorta, how to grow as a person...which you don't on a film set.

As well as learning *what* to do in their chosen area of work, a number of participants also described learning about how to "get on" in the work environment. For example, Aaron described how in one theatrical production he was involved with, the producer didn't like him and he saw that this would potentially negatively impact on his future employment with the company. However, he had learned during this experience that by making himself useful and at times indispensable, he was more likely to gain further opportunities -

With the "bump in" for the shows, I'm always there, like putting lights up...and just helping in any way - set construction and everything like that. And if you help out in that respect it can help you in the performance way...the politics of performing. (Aaron)

Others reported on the value of taking in the social aspects of "getting on" in the workplace -

...just how people react and how people get along - communication skills really and sometimes if the people are nice, they'll let you on a computer or you can even just stand behind them quietly and watch them....I just see how they do it and try to do it myself. (Scott)

Some participants reported having well-developed techniques for learning in unfamiliar environments -

...you just pick up little things from...I mean you always have to be paying attention because ...you never stop learning.

One of the key valued features of the learning undertaken in the work environment was the *authentic* nature of the work. This valuable experience was often contrasted with other or previous work experience situations where perceived menial tasks such as cleaning, stock-taking and photo-copying were allotted to the work experience person as a means of filling their time. The language young people used to describe authentic work was also often in

stark contrast with descriptions of the sorts of paid part-time jobs they did (or attempted to avoid) such as working in supermarkets or in fast-food outlets. For example, Ian reported fairly proudly that he had not had to “stoop” to getting a job at “Macca’s.” In instances where the young people saw the work as meaningful and contributing to the central activities of the workplace, they reported a great sense of satisfaction -

...they taught me how to do their cheques and stuff. (Belinda)

...being able to be on a real shoot. That this video is being made for a certain thing and its not just for a course. It’s being made and its going to be shown somewhere. (Kim)

They let you do the rooms on your own, which is really good. (Robyn)

Sometimes the real nature of the work was contrasted with the perceived deficits of learning off-the-job -

You really learn more hands-on, doing hands-on things, actually going through the process yourself than you do sitting down reading a book. Its more visual and a lot more fun than sitting down and reading a book, unless you like reading books of course. (Scott)

[Its] ...the best experience you can get. ...instead of just reading from a TAFE booklet. (Ian)

Of value was also the opportunity for contact with people who currently do the jobs the young people aspire to -

When you’re talking one-on-one with an actual firefighter who works there, sort of everyday, you get a pretty good example of how it works. (Ian)

Watching, hearing, listening – not even speaking, interacting or asking them about it – just watch how people operate and how things operate. (Michael)

At the same time, participants were not uncritical of the learning that was offered in the work environment and especially of advice offered -

...knowing who you should listen to and who you shouldn’t. ‘Cause, like being young and all, if someone comes up to you and says ‘this is what you should do’ ...like does this person really know what they’re talking about? What job do they have? Are *they* successful, are they *happy*? (Sandra)

DISCUSSION

In the current discussion of youth school-to-work transitions in Australia, there appears to be a number of questions which provide very significant challenges for policy makers. The first concerns the nature of the work environment young people face in the 21st century and the extent to which policy and practice have begun to grapple with these realities. In an assessment of the recent history of the labour market and the nature of work in Australia, Buchanan and Watson (2000) provide some sobering insights into what they see as the causes of the “new standard of precariousness”(p.18) in the working lives of many Australians evidenced by the “decline in full-time permanent jobs” (p.12). For example, they state that -

...over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, precarious categories of employment have grown at a faster rate than full-time, permanent jobs. Between 1988 and 1998, 69% of net growth in the number of employees was in casual employment" (ABS, 1999:3). Casual employment is especially widespread amongst women, where one in three are now employed on this basis (p.12).

Buchanan and Watson's thesis maintains that this current situation is the result of the recasting of the traditional relationships between labour supply, labour demand and skill formation (p.11) and the subsequent demise of the classical wage earner model and the concept of standard jobs (p.4). This scenario therefore poses some provocative questions for vocational education and training policy. Given the labour market scenario being portrayed here, the concept of "successful" youth transitions and the question of how we prepare young people for what lies ahead of them present new conceptual and practical challenges. For example, the traditional yardstick of successful transitions (i.e., full-time school to full-time work) which still seems prevalent in much of the literature, appears somewhat anachronistic in this context. At the same time, it bears remembering that fractured employment and casualised work arrangements are not a *youth* problem, as such. Rather these are features of a job market which has qualitatively changed and this is reflected in Australian (and overseas) employment practices. And while the impact of these changes should be lamented, especially with regard to the impact they are having on conditions, pay, job security and opportunities for career progression, the challenge for youth policy makers is to address the *specific* ways young people encounter these risks which are not of their own making, not due to widespread skill deficits or the shortcomings of young people themselves.

In terms of policy and practice, traditional institutional VET structures such as schools, TAFE and to some extent universities can certainly be seen to have a significant part to play if some difficult challenges are faced. In particular, James' (2000) research points to some key issues which may be illuminated by the stories provided by the young people in this study. For example, James highlighted what he perceived to be problematic (and continuing) trends in young people's attitudes towards VET and TAFE.

The young people surveyed reflect rather static perceptions about the relative roles and status of the two post-secondary alternatives in Australia... VET does not have a high profile among school students, and TAFE courses do not enjoy the status associated with degree courses. Many young people may be unaware of the VET opportunities and outcomes available to them (p.vii).

And -

Perhaps it is time for a significant reassessment of the negative effects of the current neo-binary model of tertiary education provision and opportunities. It seems likely that the national imperative of lifelong education will be best served by a highly flexible spectrum of education and training opportunities. If this is the case, then existing conceptions of higher education and VET may look increasingly irrelevant as people participate in short- and long-term educational opportunities at various stages in their lives and careers.

To some extent, the young people who participated in the research reported on in this paper appear to be working within just the sort of "highly flexible spectrum" that James proposes. This initially became apparent in the study during the process of refining the participant selection protocol for the interview. Prospective participants were asked to complete a brief survey to ascertain the extent to which they fitted the project's desired

sample of vocationally motivated, self-initiators. With this focus in mind, the goal was to select young people not headed for higher education. However a significant proportion of participants, although describing how their current combined general education and TAFE certificate courses were preparing them for immediate work opportunities, also reported that higher education was also a part of either a longer term pathway or a part-time prospect in the immediate future. For most of the participants the traditional binaries of Higher School Certificate *or* TAFE, general *versus* technical-vocational training, TAFE *or* higher education had begun to break down. The extent to which this breakdown of boundaries was a product of the environment in which these participants were currently studying perhaps deserves closer scrutiny since this model of the hybrid site may contain some solutions to the problems James found among his high school students/respondents. In the RCVET study, young people were students in an environment where general education in the form of the HSC was combined with a program of TAFE certificate courses as well as significant amounts of industry exposure. In this hybrid context, the profile and status of VET (James, 2000) did not appear to be an issue. Rather it was presented and apparently received as a relevant but not exclusive option which might serve a variety of purposes. It appears that the majority of participants in this study were in fact planning futures around the concept of “lifelong learning.” The boundaries between general education and the TAFE sector have been effectively blurred in this site, while the binary distinction between “book learning” and being in the “real world” of work has also broken down for these students. This, in turn, appears to have given the participants a greater appreciation of the range of sectors, including higher education open to them without necessarily setting a fixed hierarchy of value upon the various sectors.

Similarly, the major issue of early leaving highlighted by James (2000) resonates with the responses of the young people in the hybrid environment. Specifically, James found that his study provided -

...further evidence of the disaffection with school experienced by some young people. Clearly, traditional school curricula – particularly in the middle/senior secondary years – do not interest or motivate a significant number of young people, and they find little relevance in school to their personal objectives in life. The existence of attractive VET options while at school may be one way of sustaining school retention rates and stemming the rising rate of early leaving (p.38).

The pessimism of participants in the study reported in this paper was well established early in this paper. Most of the young people reported a very high degree of dissatisfaction with school in year 10 and discussed the desire to leave school. In fact, one of the participants did leave. The fact that Kim’s leaving became her “year off” rather than the end of her school life, was probably only due to the fact that a viable alternative became apparent. The likelihood of the other participants having made it through to the end of year 12 in the environments they described in year 10 begs the question – how many potential early leavers have completed because of the opportunities provided in the site studied? Furthermore, participants given subsequent opportunities to leave before year 12 in this new environment, even when offered a job in a desired vocational area, reported that they now decided that they wanted to complete their HSC. Ball (quoting Kidd, 1992) summarises the trend succinctly -

Kidd (1992, p.129) argues that: ‘young people will only remain in an education system if it is attractive, if it is accessible, if it caters for a wide range of abilities, if it is flexible and if

success is the reality for the majority.' In other words, the students must perceive staying on is in some way helpful (p.62).

In the interviews carried out at this site, the range of outcomes (HSC, UAI, TAFE certificates and industry experience) appeared to fulfil each of the above criteria for the participants.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to explore the experiences and activities of a group of young people who are vocationally goal oriented and optimistic about their chances of making successful transitions to meaningful working lives. There is of course, no way of knowing at this point whether the plans described by this group of young people will be carried out. In fact these types of projections were never the goal of this research.

What can be said of the young people who told their stories for this project is that they engage in education and training which facilitates their learning across a range of settings including the workplace. That they are not only purposeful but also content in their learning has a number of implications. In terms of creating policy and practice solutions in a post-compulsory setting where issues of retention and alienation (James, 2000, p.38) are still significant problems, this project perhaps highlights the need for further analysis of post-compulsory models of education and training which create environments which encourage young people to not only stay in education but also to see it in terms of productive, truly *transitional* activity.

Transition must be seen as a dynamic and not necessarily linear activity which can occur in institutional and community settings where a framework for moving between/within/amongst the sectors of general education, VET and work is not only supported but guaranteed.

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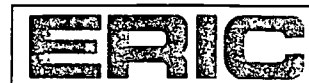
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APPENDIX 1

Name	Age at interview	Area of vocational interest	NESB	ATSI	Postcode
Lloyd	17	Design/Marketing	No	No	2250
Susan	18	Entertainment/Acting	No	No	2193
Sandra	17	Entertainment/Music	No	No	2114
Eric	17	Information Technology	Spanish/English	No	2015
Belinda	17	Entertainment/Music	Afrikaans/English	No	2234
Kim	17	Film Production	No	No	2045
Scott	17	Web-page Design	No	No	2153
Henry	16	Information Technology/Marketing	English + mother speaks Yiddish	No	2038
Ian	17	Firefighting	No	No	2122
Robyn	17	Hospitality	No	No	2330
Robert	17	Army	No	No	2250
Alicia	17	Entertainment/Acting	No	No	2088
Aaron	17	Entertainment/Acting	No	No	2085



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